



STATE OF WASHINGTON
OFFICE OF THE FAMILY AND CHILDREN'S OMBUDSMAN

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To the Residents of Washington State:

I am pleased to present to you the Annual Report of the Office of the Family and Children's Ombudsman, which summarizes the Ombudsman's activities for both 2004 and 2005. In these two years, the Ombudsman has witnessed the arrival of new leadership as well as an altered legal landscape. In this report, we recommend reducing caseworker and supervisor caseloads, strengthening the role that relative and foster care providers serve in the child welfare system, facilitating visitation between relatives and dependent children, and implementing reforms to prevent child fatalities.

This past year has brought new leadership to the Department of Social and Health Services (DSHS). We welcome Robin Arnold-Williams who has taken over the helm as Secretary of DSHS and Cheryl Stephani, Assistant Secretary of DSHS. We look forward to maintaining a collegial relationship in our work to ensure better outcomes for families and children.

The Legislature enacted several measures to strengthen the child protection system. We want to thank them deeply for their tireless efforts, particularly in the areas of ongoing concern to our office, such as improving CPS intervention in cases of chronic neglect, screening of referrals on abuse and neglect of adolescents, and addressing postpartum depression as it affects parenting.

Our new Governor, Christine Gregoire, set the stage for signing these measures into law. She provided immediate energy and initiative by articulating a "back to basics" approach to child welfare. We very much appreciate her interest and support of the work that we do.

In addition to this executive and legislative oversight, a group of experts from across the nation, the Braam panel, will be instrumental in improving our child protection and child welfare services. By ensuring that DSHS complies with a settlement agreement reached after litigation by a class of foster children, the panel will help DSHS realize internal reform. This has been a formidable undertaking and we wish to thank the Panel for its vital and conscientious work.

Tragically, child fatalities continued to demand a significant part of our focus. We reviewed the fatalities of 16 month-old Justice and six-week-old Raiden Robinson. This sobering process was repeated with the death of 4 year-old Sirita Sotelo. We continue to have grave concerns that the recommendations that arise from these and other fatality reviews, which could be life saving, are not being sufficiently and consistently implemented.

On behalf of all of us at the Office of Family and Children's Ombudsman, we appreciate your interest in our work. We greatly value our role as a voice for the families and children of Washington State and understand that we could not realize this role without the input of our advisory boards, oversight of the Legislature, and the input of citizens and professionals. Thank you for contributing to the welfare of children and families.

Sincerely,

Mary Meinig
Director Ombudsman